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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUNISTS DEFEND DEPUTY PM'S DEMANDS FOR  
POWERS

REF: BEIRUT 1513

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) In separate meetings with members of Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), DCM and Pol/Econ Chief expressed concerns that Deputy Prime Minister Issam Abou Jamra's threats to boycott cabinet meetings chaired by Prime Minister Siniora contradicted the spirit of the Doha agreement. MP Ibrahim Kenaan and Alain Aoun each defended fellow FPMer Abou Jamra's demand for the cabinet to discuss delineating his powers, arguing that Abou Jamra was merely requesting that Prime Minister Fouad Siniora add the issue to the cabinet's agenda. Instead, Siniora's refusal has now turned a small issue into a confessional one. They did not anticipate the issue would escalate to any resignations, and added that Abou Jamra was willing to attend future cabinet meetings when hosted by the President at the presidential palace in Baabda, but not when chaired by PM Siniora.

¶2. (C) Separately, Kenaan described Michel Aoun's recent trip to Iran as an assertion of Christian existence in the Middle East and an attempt to demonstrate to the international community Iran's willingness to receive Aoun. Kenaan downplayed the viability of Christian reconciliation between Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and opposition-aligned Marada party leader Suleiman Franjeh. Both Kenaan and Alain Aoun expressed their satisfaction that parliament approved a new law on the Constitutional Council, but warned against politicization of appointing members to the Council. Both men stated their opposition to the Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council, believing that it was unnecessary and "unconstitutional." End summary.

DEFENDED DEPUTY PM'S RIGHT  
TO REQUEST AN AGENDA ITEM

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¶3. (C) The DCM, accompanied by PolOff, met MP and member of Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement Ibrahim Kenaan at his home in Mutayleb on October 23. Kenaan defended fellow FPMer and Deputy Prime Minister Issam Abou Jamra's demand (reftel), saying that he was merely asking that Prime Minister Fouad Siniora put the issue of defining the deputy PM's powers on the cabinet's agenda. Kenaan said that every minister had a right to request an addition to the agenda. DCM said that

Abu Jamra's actions -- leaving the cabinet meeting and saying he would not attend those chaired by Siniora -- seemed inconsistent with Doha. He noted that the USG's disagreements with the FPM were based in part on the party's previous actions that impeded the functioning of the cabinet and the parliament, and that Abu Jamra's actions appeared to be a first step on that same path. Kenaan rejected the argument that Abu Jamra was politicizing the issue, saying Siniora had let the problem get out of hand by ignoring it.

¶4. (C) In a separate meeting FPM advisor Alain Aoun, Pol/Econ Chief said Abu Jamra's threats to boycott cabinet meetings were not a constructive way to solve political disputes, especially in the wake of the Doha agreement. In the current reconciliatory environment, such a move appeared to be a step in the wrong direction. Aoun took the point on board, but argued that Abu Jamra's actions were intended to put pressure on Siniora to heed his request to have the role of the Deputy PM added as an agenda item. He echoed Kenaan's statements and argued that in the parliament, the Deputy Speaker's role is defined in bylaws and cabinet could develop similar bylaws to define the Deputy PM's powers. Aoun explained that either parliament can pass the bylaws or the cabinet can issue a decree. For now, unlike the Deputy Speaker, the Deputy PM has no official role, he said, adding that that when MP Michel Murr was Deputy PM, he signed a decree that then-PM Salim Hoss, who was out of the country at the time, had opposed. Hoss revoked the decree, arguing that the Deputy PM did not enjoy this right.

¶5. (C) Kenaan and Aoun both recounted Abu Jamra's public

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statements the previous night when he indicated that he would attend cabinet meetings held at the presidential palace in Baabda, but would boycott the sessions at the Grand Serail, where Siniora presides, until Siniora agreed to address the issue. Kenaan explained that Abu Jamra was looking for recognition for his position, and the two FPM members blamed Siniora for letting a "small issue turn confessional." Kenaan warned that if Siniora, the Sunni PM, continued to reject Abu Jamra's request, the Christians would be perceived as operating under Sunni tutelage.

¶6. (C) Kenaan said either the cabinet or parliament could vote on the issue, but that parliament was the more likely venue since Siniora has refused Abu Jamra's demands for over two months. Kenaan noted that he was working with other MPs (from "both sides") to draft a law that would define the deputy PM's role. Kenaan dismissed the notion that this issue could lead to resignations. If Siniora called Abu Jamra today and offered him a portfolio, such as the neglected issue of treaties with Syria, Kenaan offered, the issue could be resolved.

¶7. (C) Aoun relayed that Siniora and Abu Jamra would meet later that afternoon. (Note: March 14 contacts told PolStaff the meeting would be "brokered by independent Shia Minister Ibrahim Shamseddine. End note.) Kenaan noted that Abu Jamra will appear on the popular Marcel Ghanem political talk-show later in the evening.

AOUN'S TRIP TO IRAN  
AN ASSERTION OF  
CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE  
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¶8. (C) Kenaan explained Michel Aoun's recent trip to Iran as an attempt to analyze the regional situation, premised on the notion that the west is pursuing a new policy with Syria. Kenaan said that Aoun is determined to "put the Christians in this context and assert the Christian community as an independent group." Complaining that the Christians have felt neglected by the international community, Kenaan said Aoun sees himself as the Christians' leader charged with finding a balance between the Sunnis and the Shia and to

assert their existence.

¶9. (C) "The visit itself was a message," Kenaan said, "and Aoun was able to demonstrate Iranian willingness to receive him." He disclosed that the Iranians were very interested in meeting Aoun, but that Aoun "has his limits," and did not yet determine how he would pursue this relationship. Kenaan criticized the Saudis and Egyptians for deceiving Aoun into thinking they would receive him, but instead preventing his visits. (Note: An Egyptian diplomat explained to PolOff that Aoun was invited to visit Egypt in May, but that the trip was postponed due to the clashes in Beirut. End note.)

¶10. (C) Alain Aoun interpreted Michel Aoun's statement to the press that Lebanon would see the fruits of his visit in six months to mean that the U.S. would be open to dialogue once a new administration assumed office. He further downplayed the trip as primarily a "cultural visit." DCM asked why Aoun had traveled the same week that President Sleiman went to Saudi Arabia, timing that provoked criticism of Aoun. Kenaan claimed the timing was "coincidental."

DOWNPLAYED VIABILITY  
OF CHRISTIAN RECONCILIATION  
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¶11. (C) Kenaan dismissed the viability of Christian reconciliation talks between Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and Marada party leader and opposition-aligned Suleiman Franjieh. "It's all talk," he declared, adding that serious discussions on reconciliation cannot take place in the politicized environment six months before the parliamentary elections.

¶12. (C) Kenaan said that while Geagea claimed the reconciliation was focused on calming the tension in the north, he was really hoping for the "photo opportunity" that

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such a reconciliation would present. Franjieh did not believe that Geagea was sincere, Kenaan explained, because when the Patriarch had attempted reconciliation two years ago, the March 14 Christians were "uninterested." Kenaan expressed his confidence that the opposition would be victorious in the elections.

PLEASED WITH PASSAGE  
OF CONSTITUTIONAL COUNCIL  
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¶13. (C) Pleased with the parliament's October 21 approval for a new law on the Constitutional Council (septel), Kenaan said that he had fought hard for the law's passage. He lamented that important institutions such as the Constitutional Council are revived when the political climate is amenable, but disregarded during the times they are most needed. While the Council is important, he continued, there is no role for it when everyone is compromising as they are now.

¶14. (C) He worried that the next step to fill the Council's ten seats will be politicized as ministers and MPs try to appoint individuals along party lines. If the Constitutional Council's composition was based on a power-sharing agreement, Kenaan warned the institution would be ineffective. Describing the MPs' interactions these days as "good," Kenaan expressed a hope that the sense of duty he sees in his colleagues will prevail. He revealed that he had been lobbying Aoun to support the "best" candidates to the Constitutional Council. A functional Constitutional Council most benefits political groups such as Aoun's," Kenaan assessed, and "machines like Hizballah and Saad Hariri's Future Movement" have the most to fear.

SYRIAN-LEBANESE HIGHER  
COUNCIL IS A "JOKE"  
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¶15. (C) Kenaan emphatically declared that the Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council is a "joke" and unnecessary now that Lebanon has turned a new page with Syria. Both Kenaan and Alain Aoun noted that Justice Minister Ibrahim Najjar was studying the matter, and had determined that the Higher Council was "unconstitutional." Aoun pointed out the contradictions between Lebanon's constitution and the Higher Council, saying that the Higher Council has the authority to overrule the constitution.

¶16. (C) Kenaan added that the Higher Council does not fit with Lebanon's democratic system, arguing that this kind of agreement was best made between two like-minded states. Aoun said that there were over 100 agreements "completely in Syria's favor." Kenaan noted that Michel Aoun was intending to publicly express his opposition to the Higher Council, but chose to defer to Najjar's assessment.  
SISON